



First Czechoslovak Republic and the Forms of its Celebration

Dagmar Hájková — Pavel Horák — Vojtěch Kessler — Miroslav Michela (eds.), *Sláva republice!: oficiální svátky a oslavy v meziválečném Československu* [Long Live the Republic!: Public Holidays and Celebrations in Interwar Czechoslovakia], Prague: Academia 2018, 532 p.

The celebrations marking the centenary of Czechoslovakia on 28 October 2018 may have attracted perhaps more attention to this event than it had received during all of the 1990s. This interest by a large part of the general public also opened opportunities for many scholars to publish their analyses. One of the most stimulating among them is a collective monograph titled *Long Live the Republic!*, which is dedicated particularly to the celebrations of the public holidays during the First Czechoslovak Republic (1918–1938). The book is the outcome of a long-term project funded by the Czech Science Foundation and managed by a team of scholars Dagmar Hájková, Pavel Horák, Vojtěch Kessler, and Miroslav Michela, in association with the Masaryk Institute of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic.

Through the perspective of the First Republic holiday calendar, the authors endeavoured to find out how the Czechoslovak State celebrated itself after 1918, and what traditions it followed in so doing. They also focused on the spatial aspects of the celebrations, in particular the favourite places of the popular celebrations, and on the contrary, the places which aroused the reserved reaction, or even the open resistance. The crucial question was, how the State constructed the loyalty of its citizens and what response this effort elicited in the society. The book can therefore be perceived as a contribution to the history of Czecho-Slovakism, which was an interwar attempt to create a united Czecho-Slovak nation. The authors did not consider the nation as something permanent and immutable. Together with Rogers Brubaker, they emphasize that ideas about nations are reshaped repeatedly through the actions of individual actors.

The book counts ten chapters. The first one focuses on the legislative process by which the official holiday calendar was established in Parliament. This did not take place until 1925. There was also a controversy over what events the new State should commemorate and how it would interpret them. The following nine chapters are subsequently divided into three blocks. The third and fourth chapters represent the constitutional festivities of the new State. As the treatise on 28 October shows, although this day was the most important holiday for the interwar regime, the general agreement on its form was achieved perhaps only in the Czech part of the state, with the exception of the Communist party. On the contrary, its adoption did not have such far-reaching implications in Slovakia, where a certain part of society preferred the 30 October, the date on which the Martin Declaration was adopted by the Slovak National Council.

As the authors of another study on the celebrations of President Masaryk's birthday demonstrate, the date of 7 March was able to appeal to the citizens across the country. This was probably due to the long-dated traditions of celebrating the

birthday of the monarch. By contrast, the anniversary of the Battle of Zborov in 1917 prompted a sympathetic response almost exclusively from the Czech public. Few soldiers of Slovak nationality had served in the Legions, and many Hungarians and Germans considered the Legionnaires to be more or less deserters, who, moreover, had directly fought against them or their relatives.

The second part of the book concerns the holidays with longer traditions, which partly acquired a new meaning under the new regime. First and foremost, it was the May Day, a holiday of the international labour movement, referring to the events surrounding the 1886 Chicago strike. The government institutions and the political parties made efforts to interpret it in their own way. Particularly the Social Democrats and the Communists were implicated, and even the footwear manufacturer and retailer Bata. According to the author, the celebrations of this holiday represented an imaginary arena, where more interpretations competed. By its very nature, however, it could not appeal to all the strata of society. This could not be nor for the 6 July, the anniversary of the day when a priest Jan Hus had been burned to death. The Hussite tradition had been perceived by the Czech public as anti-Catholic and anti-German. Which is why the Catholics and the Germans rejected it. Besides, two Catholic holidays, that of Cyril and Methodius, the Christian missionaries, and of Saint Wenceslas, a patron saint of the Czech lands, of the also became memorable days. Both had slightly different implications: the first could serve primarily as a symbol of the long-dated link between Czechs and Slovaks, while the Saint Wenceslas cult, referred to the link between Germany and Czech lands. Saint Wenceslas was revered by many Czech Germans, but he was barely known in Slovakia.

The third block of texts presents a perspective of German and Hungarian minorities. A chapter entitled The German All Souls' Day points out an event that took place in the mostly German city Kadaň on 4 March 1919. During a demonstration, the Czechoslovak Army opened fire on a crowd of civilians and killed 25 of them, with a total of 54 people killed in similar demonstrations in other German-speaking towns. This event subsequently became a crucial site of memory for the newly formed Sudeten German movement. In its point of view, it symbolized oppression by the Czechoslovak State. The last chapter of this sequence focuses on the Czechoslovak Hungarians. After the foundation of Czechoslovakia, they often continued to celebrate traditional Hungarian holidays, in particular the cult of St. Stephen, and the traditions of the revolutionary year 1848. Although the state authorities relatively succeeded in curbing these festivities, the loyalty of the Hungarian minority to the new State remained limited.

In sum, first of all, it should be appreciated that the edited monograph constitutes a compact entity with well-fitting chapters. This is not standard in today's Czech book production. Also, although the authors admit that they leave the events in Carpathian Ruthenia out of the picture, the include case studies manage to cover all the heterogenous territory of the then Czechoslovakia. It is worthy that the book is not one of those focusing solely on the Czech lands, while Slovakia is left aside. It is also important that the authors include the minorities perspective. Other positive point of the book is that it does not merely describe the state-prescribed form, but is also interested in the specific practices of celebrations and their local particularities.





The authors convincingly show that the then establishing state was unable to forge a consensus about the form of the holiday calendar as well as the interpretations of the individual memorable days. The State-controlled celebrations rather deepened the divisions across the social classes, the confessional and the ethnic boundaries within the Czechoslovak society than they would overcome them.

As Zdeněk Kárník pointed out earlier, during 1918 there were more revolutions in the territory of the future Czechoslovak State, and the Czech national revolution eventually prevailed.¹ It is not surprising that the founding myth of the First Czechoslovak Republic, directly linked to the Czech national story, never succeeded to fully incorporate Slovak society. The symbolical integration of the Czechoslovak Germans or Hungarians was even weaker. Consequently, the Czechoslovak nation was largely seen as an ethnic rather than a civic one. So far, however, not much work has been done to determine how the forms of celebration of public holidays, and the stories they tried to tell, limited the loyalty of the various components of the Czechoslovak society to the State and participated on the destabilization of the society. It is clear that the topic cannot be exploited by one study, so the space for further research is open. The book well illustrates just how contradictory the reactions to the State celebrations were from below. It also tries to strike a balance between describing how the holidays were supposed to be celebrated and how they were in practice. However, the debates in the Chamber of Deputies or on the pages of newspapers and other press presented in the book rather describe the events in specific municipalities than they would serve as a tool for their analysis. It was already a philosopher Emanuel Rádl in the late 1920s, who advanced that the Czech Germans cannot be expected to celebrate Czechoslovak public holidays, as their content is directed against them. These conclusions strongly resonated, however they are not mentioned in the book. If the authors would consider more such public debates, they could offer an even more vivid picture of the interwar holiday calendar.

As far as the overall structure of the collective monograph is concerned, the division into individual holidays is undoubtedly clear. Nevertheless, more attention should be paid to the *instruments* of the individual celebrations. For example, in several passages it is highlighted that a crucial component of each festival was the national anthem, and the fact that it was translated into German in 1929 is also mentioned. Yet it is not explained why it was done so late, in what the translation of the text was problematic and why it could not help the integration of Czechoslovak Germans into the State. It is also logical that the case studies focus mainly on the great jubilees celebrated until the late 1920s. Nevertheless, some chapters pay much less attention to the 1930s, which mark the limits of the interwar state. Finally, one of the strong points of the book is an extensive picture supplement, although it merely complements the text. Unfortunately, it is not directly linked to the authors' findings; there are not many references to specific illustrations or their interpretations in the respective chapters.

Despite these reservations, this publication is surely beneficial. Without a doubt, this is one of the most thought-provoking works dealing with the interwar period

1 Zdeněk Kárník, *České země v éře I. republiky*, 1st vol., Prague 2000.

lately published. It is a pity that it has not received more attention. This book not only instigates the reflections about the significant contradictions of interwar Czechoslovakia, but also about what the holiday calendar looks like in present-day Czech Republic. It is undoubtedly beneficial to ask what stories the celebrations of the national holidays tell, what role the State plays in them, and who participates (or does not participate) in them and where.

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